Chapter I: "The Native Illusionist"

"Humbert is forced into writing the Memoir by the fear of impending madness and the impossibility of ever possessing Lolita in the flesh, if, that is, the Memoir is simply a poor substitute for the living girl."

Gabriel Josipovici, "Lolita, Parody and the Pursuit of Beauty," 1971

"The work of art is not here considered an illusory copy of a true and real object, but a true and real reproduction of an illusory reality."

Allon White, The Uses of Obscurity, 1981

1. America versus Europe or the Duality between Myth and Reality in Nabokov's *Lolita.*

The title of this chapter comes from Nabokov's own reference himself "On a Book Entitled Lolita". As a Russian émigré fascinated by America, he was alluding to his love affair with the English language when he dubs himself "the native illusionist" (323). In an often quoted passage of that same essay, he claims that it had taken him "forty years to invent Russia and Western Europe, and now [he] was faced with the task of inventing America". This sentence shows the reason why the transcontinental fascination with America and Nabokov's own European views on it account for *Lolita* as a seminal work. It cuts through the heritage of both cultures and it plays with the recurrent idea that "[...] if America was the world's raising western empire, Europe must be the falling one [...]" (Bradbury 7).

Furthermore, America, as well as Western Europe, appear in Nabokov's prose as the result of an imaginative process, flourishing not only in a writer's fantasy but also rather obliquely mirrored on his main character – "an artist and a madman" with a reflexive name, Humbert Humbert. The fundamental topic discussed in this chapter will be Humbert's role, not just as the Old World's avatar but fundamentally as the "native illusionist" in Nabokov's *Lolita.*

Nabokov and Humbert should not be taken as one and the same identity, even if both are inventive émigrés, with a taste for creative writing, and an artistic urge to recreate America in their own terms. Nabokov is always the one pulling Humbert's strings: he is the real trickster. Humbert is just Nabokov's puppet, the caricature of that romantic figure – Old World in his intellect and melancholy – the "native illusionist" who is not aware he is falling in love with his foster country until it is too late.

The agelessness of Nabokov's book stems from its perennial themes, love, death, obsession, loss, the stuff dreams and masterpieces are made of. To better rehearse these emotions, Nabokov put the gulf between New and Old Worlds as *Lolita'*s backdrop and designed its main character, Humbert, as a cultured European scholar transplanted to American soil after the WWII.

Humbert is a very special human being – an ageing man in search of the nymphet, a species of unique young girls who mix the erotic with the demonic. He considers that his fundamental quest is to fix the borders of that liminal creature: half-way between innocence and experience, girlhood on the cusp of adulthood. Of course, Humbert is as liminal himself: half-way between the young boy of his childhood by the sea, and the handsome man who masks it. So Humbert too crosses some borders, plus the Atlantic Ocean, and arrives at New England with the secret craving for the enigmatic nymphet [...] (to) coach in French and fondle in Humbertish" (Nabokov 62). In a way, he sees himself as a fifteenth century conquistador, ready to mould the mythic land of his imagination, the mysterious New World, into a product of his own making: a "fanciful Lolita" (76).

Of course, the America of his dreams, that mystical land of plenty and magic becomes as elusive and untameable as its own nymphet: the teenager Dolores Haze. Humbert went to Ramsdale planning to "[...] spend a studious summer subsisting on a compact boxful of notes [...]" while simultaneously "[...] imagining in all possible detail the enigmatic nymphet (the McCoo girl he) would [...] fondle [...]". That plan is thwarted because the McCoo's house "[...] had just burned down". "[...] Angry, disappointed and bored [...]" Humbert then plots to seduce Lolita, for she wakes in him the "[...] impact of passionate recognition [...]" of his lost Annabel Leigh (35/39).

Secretly, Humbert believes that through Lolita, he can not only redeem his unhappy European past, but finally decipher the nymphetic identity. What Humbert ironically does not realise, so deeply immersed he is in his own romantic fantasies and dreams, is that by discovering the secret of nymphetism he would most likely also discover the secrets of the nymphet-lovers. That is one reason why this novel is intrinsically so complex; the voyeuristic analyser of Lolita becomes himself the one self-analysed character. The journey of seduction and consumption of Humbert's stepdaughter brings about an ultimate epiphany which paradoxically bellies the narrator's clinical desire to "fix [...] the perilous magic of the nymphets [...]" and instead draws him to enduring love (134).

Humbert may have gone to America feeling he had the cultural and intellectual upper hand due to his European education, but he did not expect to find himself forced to listen to, and end up respecting, a country and a culture that was totally foreign to him. In his excessive hubris, Humbert is sure the nymphet Lolita is his invention, product of his artistic and linguistic skills, "[...] indeed, [with] no life of her own" (62). However, Lolita is far from being that malleable because, more than Humbert's creation, she is America's, she is more of a teenage girl and less of a sexy vixen.

It is in her tacky tastes, in her love for sodas, gossip magazines and pop music, that Lolita's true self is more often than not revealed. That is the teenager in Lolita, the Dolores or Dolly in her, that Humbert at first tries desperately to domesticate with his rhetoric, so that his nymphet can safely appear. Nevertheless, Humbert comes to admit not only to love that "vulgar darling", but that he also loves what is later left of her: a measly housewife (117). In his admission, Humbert goes beyond his fantasies into the reality of Lolita, in this process admitting he loves the country she symbolises, a country that also baffled and frustrated him as often as that broken girl before him, now defaced by a big belly and a pair of glasses.

The journeys in this book come frequently across the phantasmagorical landscape which is the America of the contact zone between the real and the ideal. This dialectic mirrors Lolita's: she is at once the devilish fairy-child and the earthy teenager. Humbert also concurrently epitomises old-world politeness and erudition, and the inescapable decadence of war-struck Europe.

Humbert's journey in the New World is motivated by a bored life and a failed marriage. His trip reflects the continuity of the ageless dream of America as "Fountain of Youth" or Eldorado, the pervading fantasies awoken by this land on European minds. However, the trick in Nabokov's ingenious novel is that this seemingly common journey of delusion becomes a heroic one – the difficult rite of passage present both in classical European and American literatures – the journey which every hero must undergo in order to achieve self-knowledge and redemption. Humbert wanted to go back to the summer-bleached days of innocent love shared with his Annabel Leigh, and to the imaginary peace and happiness represented by the return to the past. Humbert wanted to find, in new prosperous America, the Time Machine that would take him back into a bygone, livelier Europe. Initially, America would always be the means, not the end, of his journey.[1]

However, by the end of his memoirs, the breach between the Old and the New Worlds seems to dwindle. Humbert's journey is close to its finale, since he is sitting in his cell, sick and dying, when he realises that no one can escape from oneself the independently of the country one fosters. Moreover, Humbert has not either been able to decipher nymphets' secrets. Lolita escaped him and became an independent human being, the married Mrs. Schiller, as inaccessible as ever, even when he selflessly offers her all his money. The magic in her is washed out, but his love for her still burns,

which is surprising and against his fanciful musings. Before dying, the enchanted hunter finally acknowledges he has become the hunted enchanter.

Thus, America did reveal something to Humbert, if not what he had initially expected- it revealed something of its wilderness, of its drabness, and in the end, of its tenderness. In a way, America, in the shape of its principal avatar, Lolita, taught Humbert how to love again, how to let go of his old-world ghostly muse Annabel, and pledge immortality to a real, rude, defaced youngster, the Mrs. Schiller Lolita has become. America and Europe's gulf is subtly blurred then, in those final lines of Humbert's confession, when he realises America taught something vital to a European.

For this is, after all, an identity-quest novel. Nabokov, however, endows his unreliable narrator with other ambiguous traits: a sense of wry humour, contempt for the American ways, a vivid imagination, an elaborate prose, and simultaneously, a primordial despair over his lost childhood. The reader goes on travelling through America with Humbert and his Lolita, watching the two cultures collide and merge, watching moreover Humbert's own journey of self-discovery placed, not in the toy-villages and luscious sets he had imagined while in Europe, but in the impromptu of America's wild landscapes and in the dinginess of 24-hour open motels.

Henceforth, Humbert is cast as an avatar for stagnant Europe, Lolita for American postwar enthusiasm, their relationship becoming an echo of that cultural interplay. As Malcolm Bradbury refers, "there's no doubt Humbert's [Nabokov's] style is an attempt to impose rich European baroque into a much plainer American subject" Lolita, a symbol for American commonness (Bradbury 453). But, simultaneously, America is not pliable to a Europeans' fantasies. Lolita resists Humbert's colonisation, backstabbing him with Quilty's stale erudition and telling him to "cutting out the French" on the charges that "it annoys everyone," i.e. every suburban teen like her (Nabokov 115).

Throughout the novel, America seems to go on destroying the European's schemes of seduction and domination, so that in the end the narrator becomes a changed better man. Thus, if one reads Nabokov's novel from this point of view, the identities which are rehearsed in this book are not only those of its main characters but those of their respective nations. Effectively, the main purpose of this dissertation's analysis is to debate whether America and Europe stand at odds, and, if this is the case, to understand whether such incompatibility has its grounds on a different way of life or is merely the product of undigested theories.

Thus, is 1947 a year of liminal change for America, and thus a twilight zone where a dreamer could find his ideal prey - the magical nymphet? And if so, is that hazy year a middle ground where Europe and America intently gazed at each other for the first time?

As Malcolm Bradbury argues, it could hardly be so. The mutual fascination of the New with the Old World, and vice versa, is as ancient as the traffic going between them; it begun as early as the discovery of the New World by the Old World in the late fifteenth century.

However, this traffic extrapolates the usual material goods reputed to have strengthened the link between Europe and America- beyond the "gold and silver, slaves and sugar, cotton and crack […] there have been more journeys of the imagination, a flourishing traffic in fancy, fiction, dream and myth" (2). And it is in this traffic of myths and fancies that Humbert finds his "ignoble, ardent, sinful dream" Lolita, the embodiment of his own European fantasies. (Nabokov 62) As already stated, he pictures this nymphet as the symbol for an idealised America, conceived, just like by so many other Europeans before and after Humbert, as "a land of opportunity and a fresh start" (Bradbury 1 – 2). This is a theme which will be contextualised later through the brief analysis of some works by Edgar Poe and Henry James, two American literary influences on Humbert's characterisation.

The fact that Humbert is capable of cerebrally acknowledging a separation between the nymphet and the teenager present in Dolores Haze brings forth many doubts about his nature. Is his clear-sightedness allowing him to look back into his past and see his errors in the light of his present experience? Is this owning up to his crude wronging of Lolita due to his approaching death, in jail and writing his memoirs? Is this detailed confession a long love letter to Lolita, the description of his arduous road towards redemption? Can Humbert recognise the abyss of his lust and solipsism because he has now reached a purer state of illumination- because his desire for Lolita has been metamorphosed into love? Did loving Lolita make him a better man intent on making amends to the country and the offspring he marred? Does Humbert truly hope that all wrongness in the past can be redeemable by his present regret, his striving for immortality alongside his nymphet?

He may, however, be judged in a less sympathetic light. Is the confession a planned retraction to confound the jury while waiting for the sentence for murdering Quilty? This admission of a plotted murder might earn him some sympathy and the forgiveness for the seduction of his preys (Lolita and his readers/jury). The sly awareness of his wrongs (indeed, at the end of the book he even convicts himself to thirty five years in jail for Lolita's rape), might even exonerate him from being an unreliable narrator. His insights on his own sordid motivations are so sharp that his clarity seems to beat the reader's; his comprehension of psychiatric jargon and social stereotypes, so mordant his sense of humour that he might win over by the disarming clairvoyance of his point of view.

Although both of these views could be supported by the text, what a closer reader should emphasise is that Nabokov intently creates these dualities in his main character. The real and unreal are enmeshed in Humbert's operatic prose. Due to his first-person-narrator status, a reader has to decide whether Humbert is indeed a vicious predator or merely a boyish adult stunned with visions of romantic love, responding as a stranger to the New World of consumerism and political anxiety; a country where the feminine role model was hardly a docile youngster from the European 20s, like Humbert's Annabel.

No matter what view a reader decides to take, he should acquiesce in the effectiveness of Humbert's dreamy references and acknowledge beyond light and darkness, the twilight of human experience and the obscurity of its motives. The twilight reaches out in Lolita's true nature and will never be truly solved. Is Lolita a devilish vixen or just an impressionable girl? Is Humbert actually led on or did he lead on Lolita in sexual playing? Is his final regret authentic or just a diverting manoeuvre to have his jury pitying and absolving him of his crimes?

The ambiguities of the novel are, of course, rooted in Nabokov's own duality, every surface being misleading, every dark angle demanding a bright one. Lolita, the child, is not utterly virginal when Humbert meets her, but she is not a corrupted pin-up either – she is somewhere in between, she is an American teen girl, a recent invention of the postwar culture, demanding and restless by definition. Humbert is not simply a pervert either. He can express horrible emotions – as his selfish desire for Lolita, or his contempt for Charlotte – but he can also be loving and maudlin in his veneration of all the diaphanous things Annabel represents; and later on, in his adoration of Mrs. Schiller, who he still wants to keep by his side, no matter how pregnant and ruined she is.

The analysis of the mechanisms Nabokov employs in order to oppose New and Old Worlds - and at the same time to blur that gulf - is much more thought-provoking than searching for the mere opposition between villains and victims. As James O'Rourke argues,

> "an anesthetized sympathy with the paedophile or his victim is inadequate to understanding; to really identify with the internal logic of the narrators of *The Enchanter* and *Lolita* is to take in a moral burden that leads to Arthur's suicide and Humbert's paranoia." (188)

Everything seems to interlock, like doubles and mirror images, reflecting themselves endlessly in Nabokov's prose. Lolita, the nymphet, is seen by Humbert as his creation, but firstly, Dolores Haze had been a creation of her era: the teenage girl; even before that, she was the creation of an émigré writer pondering upon the avatars of postwar America. So what is she really? A temptress, a suburban kid, a portrait of the inchoate youth culture, or a figment of an émigré's (Nabokov's, Humbert's) literary imagination? Can she be all and none exclusively, at the same time? This question – and it is not a mere trifle that, although the reader barely hears Lolita's voice, this elusive character gives the title to the book. As with the portrayal of Lolita and Humbert, Nabokov's ambiguous style opens up the novel to further questioning. Can America be the land of plenty, a heaven from war, but simultaneously a quilt of drab motels and dirty byroads? And can Europe be seen as a derelict site, decadent and vicious, and at the same time the birth of culture, memory and erudition?

Nabokov's ambiguous style will prevent the reader from making straightforward judgements about the opposition between the Old and the New Worlds. It may be argued that Humbert and Lolita have their different tempos, their different ways of life and they do symbolise their respective cultures. But must these cultures be intrinsically at odds with each other?

Nabokov's "friendly abyss" is here interpreted as a reference to America and Europe's interplay, always appear to cut across dichotomies and enmities. Like the bluff Humbert stares into after killing Quilty, these two nations seem fated to be separated, to gaze at each other without really communicating, as when Humbert listens to the faraway children in *Lolita:* there is no dialogue between them, just a solitary epiphany for him. And so happens with Humbert and Lolita for most of their journeys, he dumbfounded by her vulgar teen ways, she bored by his erudition and outdated finesse. Even when they travel together in such close quarters, their breach in communication is more than a geographical accident. Mostly, it is a separation stemming from the realm of imagination and what Europeans made of America - in their minds and in their lore.

As Bradbury points out, Europe always envisioned America as a wonderland, an enigmatic place, in some accounts even fantastic due to its wilderness built on "biblical notions of the return to the Promise Land" (4). This image has lasted across the centuries and probably endures because myths are effective and most European writers who describe America had never visited the continent. "America" is a mythical place spawn from literary, linguistic, wistful imagination. So this invention of the New World made from a safe distance also helped to keep the transcontinental abyss alive. Similarly, America's aura of mystery persisted in Europe, up to the late 40s, when Humbert is bored of its postwar decrepitude. It is that invented vision of America as the "country of rosy children and great trees" that appears to Humbert as "such an improvement on dull dingy Paris" (Nabokov 27).

With this in mind, it is understandable the reason why Humbert is so horrified when confronted with Charlotte's tacky house and later with Lolita's gaudy tastes. His image of America had been the one propagated by Coca-Cola-like ads, with their chubby children and mirthful families gathered around the fireplace, looking dashing and well bred. That was America's most divulged image at the time. It conveyed prosperity, easiness, joyfulness and relaxed domesticity, all that a war-struck Western Europe hardly could replicate.[2] Paris, heavily bombed during the Nazi occupation, emerges as a synecdoche for Europe after the WWII - it is reduced in Humbert's eyes to a ruined monument of the past, while symbolically New England achieves a glitter of fresh novelty (*Vide Annexes 1, 2 and 3*).

But the idealisation of the unvisited territory also exerted its power on the other half of this dichotomy. Americans also invented Europe in their minds. After all, *Lolita* elaborates on the "story of two poles of the imagination [...] and the twin terms 'America' and 'Europe' became elements in a dialectic that, like most dialectics, moved on through history, and ever-deeper into its own complexities" (Bradbury 9).

For Americans, Europe became a synecdoche of elegance, a birth of culture and erudition, which Humbert's scholarly past aptly represents. Charlotte Haze's dotting passion for Humbert is a reflex of this New Wold veneration for the figure of the old-world gentleman. In her love note,

Charlotte tries to affect that same "old-world politeness" by writing in a melodramatic tone, using French terms ("mon trés, trés cher") and opposing what she takes for Humbert's "old-world reticent" and a "'British'" propriety with her "boldness of an American girl" (76). Charlotte most certainly succeeds in mixing maudlin topics with something as mundane as "the twelve dollars [she owes Humbert] ill the end of the month", a mark of American practicality shining beneath her fake linguistic flare, or so Humbert deems it to be (68).

It is interesting to observe how Nabokov places these two characters as avatars for the enchanted visions each one had of the other's country. Humbert idealised America its "rosy children", but his encounter with Charlotte's (and later Lolita's) middle-class banality very soon disappoints him. The same happens with Charlotte; her idealised vision of European finesse is encapsulated in Humbert's old-world ways, but when she finds out about his lust for her daughter, that ideal of decorum rapidly fades.

Lolita's universe is always haunted by parody, and the characters that symbolise the most intrinsic in the two continents in the late Forties are themselves prone to be parodied. Charlotte is her ladylike affection is but mocked by Humbert who sees her as the epitome of that "middle-class noisy era" where it is difficult "to conceal things – especially when one's wife keeps monkeying with the furniture." (93)

Humbert, although making an effort to remain inconspicuous and aloof, is confined in his plotting elaborate schemes to keep his ardent wife asleep and under control. Thus, what Nabokov seems to be saying is that, not only both worlds have a less pleasant core hidden under the wraps of myth, but the separation between Europe and America is not that watertight. The European gentleman can be a manipulator and also a romantic hero; the American housewife, an ingénue, a moralist and a victim. In parody, as in comedies, there is always a double-side to things: the slapstick laughter bellied by the pathos in the beggar's misery, as exemplified in Charlie Chaplin's movies.

It is not very different in *Lolita*; Humbert is a character with a mordant sense of humour and some of his remarks are entertaining; the same goes for Lolita, Quilty or Charlotte, all of them players in facetious situations. But then, there is also a sad dimension, another layer of seriousness where all these characters suffer and die. The same can be observed about Europe and America's relationship.

America may represent avidity, mirth, opportunity, rapidity, not just through Lolita's character, but through Humbert's expectations. But, simultaneously, America is the place of Humbert's final loss, that of Lolita's and his own death and of the destructive interplay between him and his nymphet. America is the backdrop where Lolita cries every night, where Charlotte and Quilty find their bloody demises. It is too a place for rebirth – Humbert's by loving Lolita and letting go of Annabel; and of destruction – Lolita's childhood; a place of innocence – the murder of Quilty cleansing America from sordidness and Humbert from his evil double; as well as of dirtiness – all the

motels, gas stations, back roads, desolate planes and little, depressing towns Humbert passes by, plus Quilty's pornographic experiences; and of hatred – Lolita's for Humbert's demands, Humbert's for Quilty's kidnapping Lolita and for his witticisms, Charlotte's for Humbert's lust over Lolita; but also of love – finally, of Humbert's admission of his immortal love for Lolita and of Lolita's enduring love for Quilty in spite of everything.

Europe will also be measured by double standards: those of golden memories, of a past time of beauty, innocence and love, which Annabel Leigh and the Mirana symbolise; a place of culture, of great writers, great education and schools; of academic ability and good manners, all items Humbert loyally represents; but then Europe is also a place for war, ruin, emotional paralysis and intellectual lethargy.

This duality between the New, rude and forceful *Lolita*, and the Old, educated and weary, Worlds goes further into the obsession of Nabokov with doubles. is literally filled with dozens of mirror-images stemming from the dialect between Europe and America. For Humbert's American suburban wife Charlotte there is a European counterpart – Veronica, Humbert's first wife – both equally uncultivated and unsuitable to his desires, both suffering unusual deaths.

For the American symbol of perversity, the suave pornographer/playwright Clare Quilty, Europe has Humbert Humbert, equally in love with tender girls, but with a nobler soul and much more dignified attitudes, a heritage of his fine European education and his fin-de-siécle romanticism. While Humbert is a real poet and "an artist", Quilty is just a starlet and a buffoon, a notch down Europe's erudition, and a tip up on the plastic celebrity culture of the postwar. But the greatest of all duplicities is found in Lolita and Annabel Leigh. While the latter is the embodiment of old-world gentleness and innocence, the prototype of early 1920s girlish perfection, Lolita is the American symbol for the 1950s youth culture, described being as provocative, boisterous, bossy and even crude.

The mythical and dreamy which has characterised both versions of idealised America and Europe are as well represented in these characters and their doubles, as in Robert Stevenson's Victorian novella *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). The common and the diaphanous, the gross and the poetic, exist as parts of a whole, the same way the magic nymphet and the carnal teenager did in Lolita. It is when platonic love embodied in Annabel meets its physical counterpart in Dolores, that Humbert finally finds peace and a fulfilling love.

Symbolically, this is a merging of America with Europe. To grasp the whole entails to understand things not as separate parts but as a puzzle (which *Lolita* ultimately is) where pieces fit together no matter how incompatible they may seem. This also applies to the interplay between the two continents, as it did in Stevenson's story: the monster and the doctor are one body sharing two dissident personalities, and so it is with the New and Old Worlds – two different continents sharing one single planet and responding to bilateral influences.

The overlapping of Old and New Worlds finds echo on other overlapping present throughout the novel – Lolita's features match Annabel's, as recorded on Humbert's "gaze of immortal memory" (39); Humbert's own "great big handsome hunk of movieland manhood" overlaps the features of some American crooner Lolita has a crush on (72); Quilty himself resembles not only Humbert in his tastes, but also his Swiss uncle Gustave; and Charlotte's impromptu running over mirrors Humbert's mother's sudden demise ("picnic, lightening") (10).

This overlapping of identities stems from the doppelganger theme persistent in *Lolita*, but also from the overlapping of tempos which Humbert and Lolita skilfully exemplify. While he still lives as a 1920s European boy hidden in his "adult disguise" (39), arrested by the memory of the youthful Annabel Leigh, Lolita lives actively in the late American 1940s, rushing through life, consuming all the sodas and ice creams and gossip and movies she can get her hands on. While she lives in the moment, and so does America in general; Humbert dwells in a gentler past, as does his saturnine Europe, ruined in the WWII aftermath. As Tocqueville had already noted in 1830, America in *Lolita* is still seen as the country where "everything is in *constant motion*" while "Europe must be the continent of *fixidity and continuity*" (Bradbury 7, Italics mine).

While Lolita's velocity is real, the motion Humbert keeps through America's landscape is a forged one, only maintained to deceive Lolita initially. It is also designed as one of Humbert's mad plots to escape time and fate, his ruthless enemies and the enemies of brief nympholepsy. Therefore, these "extensive travels all over the States" cannot be accounted as a European's attempt to move forth and break the continuity that describes his country (Nabokov 145). More than anything, Humbert's motion through America is a paradoxical attempt to hinder time, to reverse the clock and, as before stated, go back to his childhood through Lolita's.

Of course America, the ideal, is revisited in Nabokov's novel repeatedly. It is not just one America that is being discussed here, but the myriad of significances the American myth has for the different characters of the book, and how these characters mirror their milieu. For Humbert, America is the idealised set for the redemption of a lost love, for a second chance in life; for Lolita, America is synonymy of plenty, of a culture tailored to her needs, rich in celebrities, movies, magazines and candies (*Vide Annexe 6*).

For Charlotte, America is a space of morality and good values, of middle-class concerns with appearances, represented by all the book clubs and social cliques she wants to belong to, as well as her idealised trips to the Old World. For Quilty, America is a more devious place; it is the perfect scenario for mixing economical success and fame with exemption from lewdness and crime, such as shooting pornographic movies and seducing young girls. The plurality of meanings beneath the idea of America which *Lolita* explores is vital to the dialectic between the New and the Old Worlds, but it is also important in the understanding of the book as a novel about identity. Its main characters and their

views, whereas in Europe or in America, are a direct product of who they are and how they respond to their native upbringing, of their true identities, which is never a linear topic.

Therefore, Humbert's ambivalent portrayal both as predator and victim, murderer and lover is not accidental. In order to shed light on Humbert's identity one should consider Clare Quilty, the other nymphet-lover in the plot, and weigh the differences between the American version and the European version of this proclivity. Quilty and Humbert are two sides of the same behaviour, but while one seems to evolve from lust and mourning to real affection, the former is paralysed by his lewd pornographic vision of life. Humbert already begins his life story scarred by the loss of his beloved Annabel, the one who prompted his love for younger girls, but simultaneously taught him to be nostalgically romantic. Thus, his searching for nymphets is rooted in an existential incapacity to move on from a childhood love idealised to the point of alienating Humbert from a healthy growth.

On the other hand, all that the reader knows about Quilty is that he uses his celebrity status to shamelessly fondle pubescent girls like Lolita. Without the excuse of loss and love, Quilty is the crude counterpart of Humbert's rhapsodic one. Even as their end approaches, their attitudes mark them off as opposites of each other. Humbert dies in a wrecked state in prison, heart literally broken, his crime the noble avenging of his Lolita's ruined honour. He dies seeking for repentance and a literary immortality to share with her. Quilty, on the other hand, meets his death cowardly, running naked through corridors and using a foul, pantomimic language. Higher emotions like love, redemption or respect for Lolita never touch him in his deathbed, for he is the dark half of the nymphet-lover, the truly corrupted, unsalvageable pervert. Humbert might have arrived in Ramsdale planning to forget his European incompleteness, but his love for Lolita entails his redemption from a frustrated past.

Travelling through the States with her, experiencing her specific teen culture and boisterous spirit, gave him the chance to rediscover the Romantic in him – the one who had treasured Annabel's memory for decades. That is why he is still able to mourn Lolita's childhood on the bluff over the laughing children, after Quilty's death. It is as if, by killing Quilty, he changes the alter-ego drama into a drama of salvation, killing the malignant side symbolised by his evil twin. He is then cleansed of all emotions that corrode pure, romantic love – carnal desire, jealousy, pettiness, violence – all of which Quilty did indeed embody. For Quilty is the real paedophile stalking this story. He is the one who preys on Lolita as disposable, useless object, barely remembering her when Humbert confronts him with his criminal pursuit of the youth. Both Quilty and Humbert lusted after the same young girl, but Humbert loves Lolita in his old-world, chivalrous terms, as his immortal muse and bride, while Quilty sees her simply as one of his sex toys, replaceable and thus forgettable.

2. Literary Influences from the New and Old Worlds in Humbert's Characterisation:

Representing different cultures through two antithetic characters stems from a remarkably noble tradition in American Literature and Culture. Nabokov's interplay is rooted in the persistent comparison between the New and the Old Worlds, a comparison that can be dated back to the Puritan Winthrop and his seventeenth century inspirational speech *A Model of Christian Charity*. In this historical text, the New World is extolled as a bastion of God's gifts, "A City upon the Hill", while the Old World is concurrently described as a sinful "Babylon", from where the Puritans with a sense of mission escaped.

In the field of the novel, this cultural gulf is the very matter of the earlier writings of the nineteenth century author, Henry James. American by birth, but English by choice, James's life between America and Europe set him in a privileged position to elaborate on the dichotomies underlining the inter-continental chiasm. With a remarkable command of the English language and an imaginative bend on social issues, James really never exhausted the theme of the differences between Old and New Worlds.

James's American characters, particularly in the early novels, are as much an idealised prototype of innocence and optimism as initially Lolita is for Humbert in Nabokov's novel. That is the reason why James is such an important influence in Nabokov's *Lolita*. Both authors tend to embellish a country that in most minds has always stood for freedom and fertility, even before it was truly colonised or shaped by the European hands that found it and peopled it. European Humbert initially imagining America as "the country of rosy children and great trees" is indeed pivotal in the novel's plot; Henry James, however, had already drawn the scenario decades before (27).

One of James's earliest studies on the contamination of America by a cunning Europe is found on the novel *The American* (1877). The very friendly and rich American, Christopher Newman travels to Paris waiting to be bathed in culture and beauty, only to find himself entangled with an Old World aristocratic family named *de Cintré*. Fascinated by their daughter's beauty and grace, Christopher goes through a hostile courtship with Claire, unaware that his unseemly presence is only tolerated due to his great wealth. Christopher's optimistic naivety mirrors Lolita's, as simultaneously, Christopher's incomprehension of European etiquette mirrors Lolita's incomprehension of Humbert's French expressions, his elaborate use of the English language or his highbrow tastes.

The characterisation of young and bountiful America is readily opposed to the declining Europe, which preys on the New World's heartiness until it bleeds out. In *The American* one finds the eulogy to America much more poignant for, after a long and painful wait for Claire to marry him, Christopher finally understands how vilely he was explored by the all the Europeans, with the

exception of Claire's younger brother, Vincent. Even the pretty but poor copyist he met immediately after arriving to Paris, Noemie Nioche, was deceitful about her nature and the price of her reproductions. *The American* would come to be regarded as one of the first international stories dealing with the contrast between the New and the Old Worlds.

A good number of James's novels are filled with these useful examples, proving that the dialectics between Europe and America was alive well before Nabokov's Humbert Humbert came along. What one can add is that in *Lolita*, the tone in which these dichotomies are exposed is less solemn and more parodied. While in *The American*, Christopher Newman's journey is a testimony to America's sturdiness against Europe's aristocratic hypocrisy, in *Lolita* nothing is that clean-cut. As it was stated before, all its plot is seen through Humbert's eyes and what this unreliable protagonist sees is an idealised space, an America that should be a pure counterpoint to decadent Europe. However, this country ends up having its own dark underbelly, a string of ludicrous characters like Rita, Quilty and Quilty's friends, a depressing collection of "dead of night towns" and conspicuous back roads, plus a fast-paced culture which transforms twelve year olds in scheming seductresses (Nabokov 245).

Humbert's sarcastic remarks about Charlotte's behaviour; she is the epitome of postwar American suburbia, or Lolita's mundane tastes, the cloying food and "hiccuppy music," allow for a comic relief in the dialectics between the Old and the New Worlds Henry James did not achieve in *The American* (104).

If the protagonist leaves Europe mainly unharmed by its vices in *The American*, the outcome is deadly for the American protagonist in *Daisy Miller* (1878). She is the epitome of nineteenth-century American joyfulness, the same way Lolita is in the postwar years. Like her Nabokovian counterpart, Daisy Miller is frank and flirtatious, youthful and wilful; however, she finds herself misunderstood in the stifling atmosphere of European holiday resorts. Her outspoken honesty shocks those conservative Europeans used to traditional hypocrisy. She is then deemed uncultivated in the same fashion Humbert initially confounded Lolita's jovial carelessness with cultural inferiority. Even the American she enamours, Winterbourne, is unable to abandon his passion for cultivated European sophistication at the expenses of Daisy Miller's candid impoliteness.

This brief account of James's works is relevant to establish a literary context for Nabokov's Humbert and some of his views on the New World. But what should be taken into account is that, although he moved to Ramsdale in search of a fresh start: "Herr Humbert" also dragged with him a bulk of old-world influences kept in his "Central-European trunks (ready) to gather dust in (the) corner behind a heap of old books" (56).

Edgar Allan Poe is another pivotal undercurrent in Nabokov and it surfaces in Humbert's peculiar line of thought. It is a curious game of reciprocities because Poe's romantic imaginary owes a good deal to British Gothic writers like Mary Shelley and Horace Walpole, and his eerie mysticism to

Romantics like Coleridge and Keats; other influences on him are the morbid themes of German Romanticism. Moreover, Poe, like Humbert, led a life of quasi-incestuous love with his cousin, Virginia Clemm, whom he married when she was barely fourteen. Sickly and frail, she embodied Poe's ideal of candour, the Romantics' muse, reminiscent as well of Dante's and Petrarch's platonic beloveds: Laura and Beatrice. Like Annabel and Lolita, Virginia died young due to painful tuberculosis.

Humbert and Poe, one in fiction, the other in real life, are poets and madmen (or at least Humbert describes himself with those two attributes), both evoke their sorrows and loved ones through the power of their vivid imagination and speedy pen. Poe created short stories famous for their suffocating atmospheres, where beautiful, educated, enfeebling girls are afflicted by unknown diseases (Madeleine in "The House of Usher", "Berenice", "Morela", Ligeia", etc). Quite like Humbert's Annabel, they all terminally perish in front of their impotent male lovers.

Humbert fights Lolita, steals her money impeding her of fleeing from him, and does not let her interact with other people for she possessed "a glow" which seduced every man in her periphery. Egeu in Poe's story "Berenice" rips his cousin's teeth out of her lethargic body, so he can service his monomania and render her defenceless, teeth being a very important symbol, which feminists have seen them as a sign of womanly independence, a kind of dented vagina.

In Humbert's mind, Lolita's teeth are always connected with the Old World sanguinary vampire, for they are tainted with red lipstick as blood smears, or are described as a "rosebud degenerate mouth" (218). Teeth are yet symbolic for sexual tension and vicious desires. When Humbert claims to have a bad toothache, "an enormous molar" needing to be nursed, this metaphor stands for his growing, painful desire for Lolita (43). But moreover, teeth are symbolic of everlasting childhood, as it is seen in the description of Humbert's favourite hero: J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*. When Peter comes to Wendy's room in the dark, his glimmering milk teeth are what give him away as a naughty child and not an adult intruder.

Other points of contact between Poe's and Nabokov's prose are the insistent dual nature that nymphets supposedly exhibit, masking a truly demonic nature with a false likeness to humanity and innocence. Splitting the real girl from the solipsised version is what Humbert does in their first unilateral encounter, as previously stated. Hence, the real girl is substituted by Humbert's imagined muse, a variation of Annabel's ghost. By sapping the living girl's ability to fight back, to repudiate him or even disappoint him, his ideals of childhood fantasies are kept safe.

Now the same schism happens with Egeu, while narrating the pivotal birth of his monomaniac passion for his cousin (once again the incestuous love theme) - the "agile, graceful, and overflowing with energy" Berenice, now transformed into a "lifeless, and lustreless" creature. Egeu expresses this transformation like this,

> “During the brightest days of her unparalleled beauty, most surely I had never loved her. In the strange anomaly of my existence, feelings with me, had never been of the heart, and *my passions always were of the mind*. Through the gray of the early morning […] she had flitted by my eyes, and I had seen her - *not as the living and breathing Berenice, but as the Berenice of a dream; not as a being of the earth, earthy, but as the abstraction of such a being; not as a thing to admire, but to analyze; not as an object of love, but as the theme of the most abstruse although desultory speculation*.”

Egeu solipsises his loved object, Berenice, in order to incorporate his muse in an inner and deranged universe, thus keeping her separated from the coarse world. Humbert too wishes to preserve the “fanciful Lolita” as crystallised as Annabel in his mind, impossible to be released, impossible to be altered by the tides and the wastes of time (56).

These girls represent an egotistical “[...] *theme* of the most abstruse although desultory speculation […] than an *object of love*.” The immortality Humbert and Egeu hope to achieve through their monomaniac passions is analogous to Beatrice’s or Laura’s. Literary creations must abide by their creators, their fates everlastingly intertwined, their names replica of one another, one delegating its immortality in the other’s capacity to draw an unforgettable, though unrealistic, portrait of its adored subject. This is what Poe’s narrator does in “The Oval Portrait,” appropriating the sitter’s youth and beauty onto the canvas, leaving the girl drained of life while the portrait shimmers with supernatural youthfulness and vivacity. In metaphorical terms, Humbert does the same to Lolita. By the end of the novel he transformed her in a prematurely wasted girl who is dried up of youth by the time she is seventeen, parched by her captor’s plan of selfishly trapping her childhood on his mental canvas. Lastly, Poe’s narrators are also haunted by an obsession which forcefully haunts Humbert’s life for twenty-four years - the desire to incarnate the “little girl with her seaside limbs and ardent tongue,” the dead Annabel Leigh, in a living being, her American double Lolita, and thus “break [Annabel’s] spell” for good (15).

“Ligeia”’s narrator also goes through the grief of losing his marvellously intelligent wife, whom he met "in some large, old decaying city near the Rhine” (569). From then on, he dreams of reincarnating her in the blonde, bland frame of his second wife Rowena. He is consummated in this fancy, obsessing him as it did Humbert who hankered for his magical incarnation for a quarter of century. In the end, both are left bitterly and fatally disappointed with their experience. The impossibility of going back in time is the lesson provided by the authors.

But Poe’s principal influence in Humbert’s imagery is to create the prototypical Annabel Lee, the dead girl that symbolises Humbert’s “open wound”. She represents the epitome of young doomed love, a love so deep it made the “angels in the sky […] envious” of the bliss shared in that “kingdom by the sea”. In their turn, Humbert’s “seraphs” will in contrast be “misinformed, simple, noble-winged”, but no less fatal than their forerunners (9).

Poe's poem "Annabel Lee" (1849) also propels Humbert's setting by the idyllic Riviera seashores, near his father's hotel, the Mirana. This dream-like dwelling will be later on echoed in Humbert's description of "the pale palace of The Enchanted Hunters […] a diamond of a glow through the mist […that] appeared […] marvellously and inexorable, under spectre tress" (117). It is in this haunting scenario that he spends his first night with Lolita, at last consummating through her, his long unfulfilled affair with Annabel.

But apart from Poe, Humbert's books are a very unique assortment, where one can find an intricate mixture of folktales and erudite literature. There are allusions to old fairytales such as *Briar Rose*, *Snow White* ("she was …holding in her hollowed hands a beautiful... Eden-red apple", 57), *Beauty and the Beast* ("my gagged, bursting beast and the beauty of her dimpled body", 59), *Red Riding Hood*, *Sleeping Beauty* ("[…] beautifully coloured capsules loaded with Beauty's Sleep", 122), among others. But these references are blended with Baudelaire's *Les Fleures du Mal*, (1857- 1st edition), a collection filled with lethal female creatures,[3] or other femmes fatales that mystically render their lovers powerless.[4] These elements are all present in Humbert's depiction of his imaginary bloodthirsty beloved, the nymphet Lolita, with "her teeth resting on her glistering under lip" (61).

Some English Romantic poets – Blake with his *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *Songs of Experience* (1794); Wordsworth and Coleridge with their *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) – have a marked influence on Humbert's vision of infancy as pure, as well as his naïve expectations in finding in America, and in Lolita, a symbol for childish innocence opposed to his experienced adulthood in France: his failed marriage, the Monique incident, etc.

Humbert is clearly indebted to Blake's songs, to his idealisation of how tender childhood is, painting it with the same rose-peach and golden hues Humbert colours his own. Even the ethereal Annabel (and later Lolita) is exhaustively compared with roses (Lolita's "pale breastbuds", "dazed rosedarling" 122 –125). This artifice relates the nymphet's brevity, not only with Annabel's precocious demise, but also with Blake's poem "The Sick Rose", a thematic forerunner.

In this enigmatic poem from *Songs of Experience,* one can picture a delicate child (the Rose) dying with an unknown sickness that corrupts her like "an invisible worm;" the "bed of crimson joy" seems to echo Poe's poem "Annabel Lee" with her "sepulchre there by the sea." Incidentally, it also echoes Humbert's description of Annabel falling ill suddenly, so that the most emblematic memories he keeps from her are from those few days on the beach, this beach mirroring Poe's "kingdom by the sea." Thus Annabel in Humbert's mind is interred in a "tomb by the sounding sea" where he, like Poe's lyrical I, goes metaphorically "all the night-tide […] to lie by her side."

As Annabel perishes of fulminating typhus (again "an invisible worm"), she is empowered with the capacity to haunt and shape Humbert's life into a seemingly catastrophe; or as Humbert himself puts it, his "days of youth" were "pale repetitive scrapes like those morning snow storms of

used tissue paper that a train passenger sees whirling in the wake of the observation car" (15). Like the worm weakening the Rose, Annabel is now the sickness that, stealthy but surely, poisons Humbert's heart, i.e. his "open wound", that "[...] consolidate[ed] the frustration of that nightmare summer, […] mak[ing] of it a permanent obstacle to any further romance thought the cold years of [his] youth" (14).

Another possible interpretation is that experience lives inside innocence, as a maggot on a shiny apple (and Lolita indeed suggestively eats an apple at the time Humbert first steals his "spasm"), although the observer does not notice it until it is too late; then "its (the worm's/ experience's) dark secret love/ Does thy life destroy." Therefore, if a reader chooses to cast Humbert as a victim, Lolita with her sturdy good-looks, may be seen as a temptress in disguise, ready to wreck Humbert's life and ultimately land him in jail, degraded and terminally ill.

Furthermore, if one agrees that Nabokov intended for his novel to have a "plight for the victimized child", as asserted by Ellen Pifer (21), then the one poisoned, the one who indeed had something "broken" by her abductor is Dolores, the human child who existed behind the demonised version Humbert created to be his "Sick Rose," his new "darling and bride" (39). So Lolita is to Humbert what Annabel Lee was for Poe's narrator: a mirage, a warped projection overlapping the real girl, or in Poe's real existence, his young wife Virginia.

The same imagery of the female child mixed with oblique undertones has a notable forerunner in Coleridge's poem *Christabel* (1797-1800). "The lovely lady, Christabel, /Whom her father loves so well [...]" and Geraldine, with "the neck that made that white robe wan, / Her stately neck […]/Her blue-veined feet […] The lady's eyes (that) shrunk in her head, / Each shrunk up to a serpent's eye, /And with somewhat of malice, and more of dread […]."

Coleridge's poetic representation of the she-vampire also adds another pertinent aspect to Humbert's depiction of Lolita – the irresistible spell a child has on her (step) father: "A little child, a limber elf, /Singing, dancing to itself, /A fairy thing with red round cheeks, /That always finds, and never seeks, /Makes such a vision to the sight/As fills a father's eyes with light […]" Plus, attributes such as "elf" or "fairy thing with red round cheeks" echo the description Humbert constantly makes of his nymphet, "a fairy princess between her two maids of honor" (52), "lips as red as licked red candy" (44); "a painted girl-child" (71) and "rosy, golden-dusted" (60).

John Keats and his poem *Lamia* (1820) are also echoed in Humbert's mental creation of the devilish nymphet: "[...] all *crimson barr'd*; / She seem'd, at once, some penanced *lady elf*, / Some *demon's mistress*, or the demon's self." In Keats's poem there is also a "bewitched traveller" like Humbert, seeking "where this *sweet nymph* prepar'd her secret bed", while she prophesises that "'When from this *wreathed tomb shall I awake*! / When move in a sweet body fit for life, / And love, and pleasure, and the *ruddy strife*/ Of hearts and lips!'" Most of the Lamia's description evokes

Lolita's: part demonic, red-tinged and elfish- as well as mirrors Poe's Annabel Lee, asleep forever in "her tomb by the sounding sea".

Nabokov's novel is indeed a quilt of literary references, a puzzle of puns and allusions sometimes almost impossible to identify. Simultaneously, it is this cultural richness that makes of Humbert a reliable European paradigm; he does not simply own a mixed bloodline, as he also truly encases in his intellect the various influences of many European writers. However, some of the masters of Humbert's devotion are more than *fin-de-siécle* poetic sensibilities; they are his most steadfast accomplices when he exposes his love case for the tender nymphets. What Dante, Poe and Petrarch all have in common is their passion for younger girls ("*la fruit vert"* Humbert would call it) and their capacity to immortalise their fleeting youth through their art (40). That is the kind of immortality Humbert, in the end of his tale, will seek to share with his "American sweet immortal dead love" Lolita the same kind of literary and memory-linked immortality he had once shared with his Annabel Leigh (280).

Humbert expertly claims that his proclivity is very recurrent among the brightest minds; "Dante fell madly in love with his Beatrice when she was nine, a sparkling girleen, painted and lovely [...] and [...] Petrarch fell madly in love with his Laureen, she was a fair-haired nymphet of twelve, running in the wind [...] a flower in flight" (19). Still, Humbert forgets to add that a young child in Dante's, or even Poe's, time would be considered an apt young adult by the time she would be thirteen or fourteen. In the sixteenth or nineteenth centuries life's hardships would easily diminish the life-expectancy of a woman to thirty years old; therefore fifteen would be already considered middle-age.[5] Although Lolita will hardly be a fey child by the time Humbert meets her, one cannot claim she was fully aware of the consequences of flirting with a middle-aged man.

But going back to the previously referred authors, they not only have in common the taste for extreme youth, but the fact that they coupled it with innocence. Petrarch, Dante, and occasionally Poe, all extolled their beloveds as summits of virtue, beauty, and most of all, platonic adoration. In their youth lived an ingenuity impossible to be marred by world's base experiences; they lived on unreachable, forever young and chaste, but never fully possessed, just like Humbert and his dead Annabel Leigh. This disappointment alone could explain Humbert's drive to leave the war-struck continent behind and sail into the shores of a new "princedom by the sea" (9), much like – and I am fully aware of the differences in both characters – in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* Kurtz left England, bored with Victorian triteness, his avid eyes set on the virginal African continent.

Humbert sails onward to America, "[...] allergic to Europe, including merry old England [...and with nothing but] very sad associations with the Old, rotting World" (91); but with Humbert's hopes it also went those dusty trunks and books, which are more an emotional baggage than a literal burden. They function as Humbert's remembrance of his European past, always dragging him down to

the place where he was forged, “[...] a salad of racial genes: a Swiss citizen, of mixed French and Austrian descent, with a dash of the Danube in his veins” (9).

He is the final product/ he is at the confluence of many arrogant, cultured, once grand, now decrepit, bloodlines. He is like Kurtz in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* a hybrid mixture of nationalities and cultures, all bound together by their rapid degradation of values and innate melancholy. Both these characters mourn their lost innocence and their inner “sly tumescent devil(s)” (116). Furthermore, they will both be brought down by their high intellects and too-close contact with forbidden experiences in foreign ground. For Kurtz this experience is the inebriant, amoral power rooted in the darkness of the African wilderness; for Humbert it is the fatal aftermath of being involved in his own “American Dream”.

Humbert is also as cultured as Kurtz, his English counterpart - he is a teacher of English, “[...] college student in London and Paris […] discussed Soviet movies with expatriates […] sat with uranists in the Deux Magots (Paris) […] published tortuous essays in obscure journals […] started to compile that manual of French literature for English- speaking students” (15 – 16). And of course, following his boyish desire “to be a famous spy” (12), adult Humbert also spied on little girls who were a unique breed of magic creatures, those hidden nymphets.

But beyond the incongruity of paring up an American child with a European middle-aged man, there is a paramount question – did sheer human purity ever exist? Or as Phyllis Roth porposes, by presenting Fiedler’s 1958 argument, the true horror behind *Lolita* is not pornographic but idealist? “It is the final blasphemy against the cult of the child […],” this American critic boldly suggests, “It is the American who corrupts the sophisticated adult […]” (13).

So are or are not children the safe-keepers of human naivety? To go back to Henry James’s works, can one wonder whether he was right in creating a vision of infancy which is so ambiguous in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). In this most intriguing plot, a young governess takes care of two small orphaned children in an isolated mansion supposedly haunted by the spirits of the previous governess and her lover. Very soon, a mounting sense of fear grips the reader, as well as the governess, when it seems that the two eerie siblings, Flora and Miles, are more dangerous than the ghosts themselves, more the incarnation of manipulation and evil than of goodness and innocence. Lolita also exhibits the same malicious nature, if one believes Humbert who describes hers as such, then a more pertinent doubt is raised: was America ever the nubile territory of a mythical literary tradition?[6]

It is a question that mirrors the one at the end of James’s novella: is the governess a deluded woman who conjured up ghosts in her mind, hence sharing a similar fatality to Humbert’s? Or is Miles, the child, a naughty, smart boy, after all an impish devil that drove her to madness, as Lolita might have driven to Humbert?

This example sheds light on Nabokov's fundamental concerns – is Humbert the capricious paedophile preying on a girl's light-headed culture, as some critics like Ellen Pifer suggest,[7] or is Lolita a child of hidden, noxious qualities, a mirror of Henry James's Miles, "[...] a demonic visitor to the common world [...]," that exerted her dark spells on Humbert's lucidity (Nabokov 34)? And if so, then was it not "[...] Lolita herself", wonders the social critic Marie Winn quoted by Pifer, "unvirginal long before Humbert came upon the scene, so knowing, so jaded, so *unchildlike*, who seemed to violate something America held sacred"(84)?

One should bear in mind that Nabokov's character, Humbert, came to America with his existential wound open, his mouldy trunks filled with old book, hungering for a heap of impossibilities. Postwar America did stand happily on the top of the world, but it still hid the nagging doubt that maybe it was all worthless, that maybe, "[...] all our getting up and spending amounts to nothing more than fidgeting while we wait for death" (Delbanco 3).

As a visitor from another country, Tocqueville, described in the 1830s, "[...] at every moment (Americans) are about to grasp it (happiness/innocence), it escapes at every moment from their hold. They are near enough to see its charms, but too far off to enjoy them; and before they have fully tasted its delights, they die" (4).That "dark twin of hope", melancholy, which Delbanco argues is one of the seminal traits in America's ascending history, has its roots in America's Puritanical ideology (2). This emotion has had a rather profound influence on, what we, for lack of a better term, call the American mind. Much has been written about its changes in the post-world war II and, then, in the contemporary period. The next chapter provides a further attempt to analyse cultural ambiguity, how such ambiguity pervades Lolita's post-war American society and how it relates to Humbert's Old World.